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A Decolonised Alpha Hero? Negotiating Masculinities in Nigerian Romance Novels

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Abstract: A "strong assertive hero who is in charge and oozes power" (Caldwell): the romance alpha hero is as familiar as he is monolithic. This model of hegemonic, alpha masculinity is generally applied to romance across the world, yet how ubiquitous is such a model of masculinity? Would it be visible in heterosexual romance novels published in Africa, written by African authors? As Connell and Messerschmidt theorize, masculinities are "configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold, and change through time" and place (Connell and Messerschmidt 852). Thus, drawn from narrow and specific cultural, national, and racial contexts, the romance alpha hero is far from universal. This article investigates the construction of African heroes in ten titles published by Nigeria's Ankara Press (2015-2017), "a new imprint bringing African romance fiction into the bedrooms, offices and hearts of women the world over" ("About Us"). Ankara Press promises "[a] new kind of romance" ("About Us")—this article asks: does it also provide a new kind of hero? I explore the ways Ankara heroes reveal local ideas about gender and culture, while simultaneously offering a rejoinder to the ubiquity of the Western alpha. Ankara Press romances partially reject Western alpha masculinity, locating the perceived toxicity of alpha masculinity in African culture and in "other," non-heroic men. These novels offer a space to explore African masculinity and its challenges while simultaneously, I argue, decolonising romance, allowing us to emerge with a more nuanced appreciation of the alpha hero and his universality.

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Introduction

> Women of all ages have always enjoyed romance. They ask for it in their movies, in their music, from their lovers and in their books. But in Africa, they have had to find it in the pages of Western romances [sic] series like Mills and Boon, Silhouette and other Harlequin titles. It is time that the continent's rising consumer class gets romances that reflect the complexity of their modern lives. (*Submission Guidelines*)

This statement is drawn from submission guidelines for Ankara Press, a Nigerian romance novel imprint of publisher Cassava Republic Press, launched in 2014. It points to two important contexts for this article. First, is the desire for (and presence of) specifically African romance novels. From Onitsha market literature in 1950s eastern Nigeria (see Gehrmann), to Kano market literature—Hausa *soyayya* romance novels—in northern Nigeria (see Whitsitt), to the Pacesetter, Drumbeat and Hints novels of the 1970s and 1980s, and new indigenous publishers such as Sapphire Press, Nollybooks (South Africa), and Adoras (Francophone Africa) in the twenty-first century (see Shercliff)—there is a clearly established literary tradition of romance in many African countries. The second context is the globalisation of romance publishing, observed here in the proliferation of Western[1] romance novels in Africa—"they have had to find it in the pages of Western romances [sic] series like Mills & Boon, Silhouette and other Harlequin titles"—and the dominance of Western romance forms. This short paragraph reveals the failure of universality or global appeal of the Western romance novel and, according to the tagline for Ankara Press, the need for "A New Kind of Romance" ("About Us").

As this article will outline, one of the key differences between Ankara Press romances and Western romance is the articulation of the hero. The press's submission guidelines stipulate that "traditional romances … [o]ften … rely on dangerous notions of male dominance, control and manipulation," whereas Ankara heroes should be "handsome, charming men who are secure in their identities and respectful of a woman's choices" (*Submission Guidelines*). This imprint is deliberately steering away from existing, Western, "traditional" hero archetypes: in other words, the alpha hero.[2] At the same time, scholars of men and masculinities in Africa have identified "[a] need … for decolonising work and decolonial approaches to the very category of men, the very language and concepts we use to think of masculinity" (Ratele, "African and Black Men and Masculinities" 127). As Mfecane puts it, "theories are not neutral tools for undertaking research" (293). This article brings together these discourses to explore the representation of masculinities in contemporary African romance novels. My interest is specifically on the hero and the ways his literary construction challenges both local gender ideology and the colonial hegemony of the Western alpha archetype. I begin by introducing Ankara Press and its contexts, before outlining the shape of the Western alpha hero as well as introducing some key discourses important for the consideration of men and masculinities in Africa. I then move to consider

key aspects of the Ankara hero's representation, namely his physical appearance, mood and temperament, career, wealth and status. I finally explore the ways in which certain traits of alpha masculinity are resignified as "toxic" and are displaced either into African culture, or onto other men in the romance. I end by considering some of the implications of Ankara Press' reworking of romantic masculinity for popular romance studies and for critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM).

Ankara Press and African romance

The twenty-first century has seen a flourishing in accessible global markets for romance and its related subgenre chick lit, with an attendant scholarly interest (Daud). While romance has long been widely read in many African countries (see Boni; Erwin; Gehrmann; Griswold and Bastian; Moudileno; Muhomah; Spencer, '"In Defence of Chick-Lit"'; Whitsitt) a string of new imprints and series have emerged more recently. South African imprints Sapphire Press and *Nollybooks*, both launched in 2010, are examples of what Gehrmann calls "the modern urban variant of romance writing" (70–71); Folie labels *Nollybooks* "a series of easy-to-read, chick-lit romance fiction titles with South African storylines and characters" (321). Such books draw features from both romance—a focus on a central couple, a happy ending—and chick lit—humour, and a lone woman on the cover rather than a couple. Gehrmann remarks on the similarities between *Nollybooks* titles (launched by a South African firm but founded by a Nigerian-born author) and those published by Ankara Press (71). In 2013 (just one year prior to the launch of Ankara Press), Kenyan publisher StoryMoja created the "Drumbeat" series, which called "for authors to submit chick lit stories with the intention of creating a local version of the UK's Mills and Boon in e-Book format" (Abrams 2014, cited in Folie 321). Such reference is unsurprising; as Daud points out, "the Harlequin publishing house, and the Mills & Boon line which has become synonymous with its name, dominates both the romance market, and the scholarship that has mushroomed around local forms of popular romance globally" (529–30).

Ankara Press is "devoted to publishing easy-to-read, purse-size romantic fiction titles with African settings, storylines and characters" (*Submission Guidelines*) that similarly blend literary and paratextual elements of romance and chick lit. The publisher has so far released "an affordable series" (Gehrmann 71) of ten contemporary romance novels between 2015 and 2017, made available first as e-books then print, and an anthology of short stories in 2015.[3] The novels range in length from 105 pages (33,858 words) to 147 pages (46,803 words) with between 10 and 19 chapters. The Ankara "collection" of full-length romance novels consists of: Oyindamola Affinnih, *A Tailor-Made Romance* (2015); Sifa Asani Gowon, *A Taste of Love* (2015); Ola Awonubi, *Love's Persuasion* (2015); Chioma Iwunze-Ibiam, *Finding Love Again* (2015); Amara Nicole Okolo, *Black Sparkle Romance* (2015); Amina Thula, *The Elevator Kiss* (2015); Aziza Eden Walker, *The Seeing Place* (2016); Amina Thula, *Love Next Door* (2016); Ola Awonubi, *Love Me Unconditionally* (2017); Aziza Eden Walker, *This Crazy Paradise* (2017).

The novels are urban in their setting except for Iwunze-Ibiam's *Finding Love Again* which takes place at Obudu Mountain Resort in eastern Nigeria, near the border with Cameroon. Six of the ten novels (including *Finding Love Again*) are set at least partly in

Nigeria (mainly Lagos, but also Badagry, Jos and Abuja) with the remaining four set at least partly in South Africa (Cape Town, Johannesburg, Guguletu, and Langebaan). Three texts are also partly set in London (Awonubi's *Love Me Unconditionally* and *Love's Persuasion*, and Walker's *This Crazy Paradise*). All ten texts focus on the development of a romantic relationship between a heterosexual man and woman and feature common contemporary romance and chick lit tropes, including rival suitors (*Black Sparkle Romance*, *The Elevator Kiss*), workplace romances (*The Seeing Place*, *Love's Persuasion*), relationships of convenience (*Finding Love Again*), and emotional barriers from previous relationships (*A Taste of Love*, *Love Me Unconditionally*, *This Crazy Paradise*). They differ in their degree of sexual explicitness. Awonubi's *Love's Persuasion* and *Love Me Unconditionally* and Gowon's *A Taste of Love* do not permit their couples to go beyond kissing, but all the other texts feature more explicit sexual contact. While the publisher's submission guidelines invite prospective authors to break stereotypes and conventions, they also provide a chapter-by-chapter structure for submissions. The books clearly follow a formula of sorts—but are they similarly formulaic when it comes to the presentation of masculinity?

Defining Alpha Masculinity

The alpha hero of Western romance is an archetypal literary representation of hegemonic masculinity, "the most honoured or desired in a particular context" (Connell, *Gender* 28). Borrowing from Kimmel, Allan argues that romance hero masculinity "is the relentless repudiation of the feminine," "is measured by power, success, wealth, and status," "depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis, holding emotions in check"—"[b]oys don't cry"—and "[e]xud[ing] an aura of manly daring and aggression" (Kimmel 125-126 cited in *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* 11–12). The homogeneity of this alpha hero, as well as his importance to the romance genre, is evident when synthesising the way scholars have defined him. He is "strong mentally and physically tough, intelligent, tall and dark" (Alan Boon, cited in McKnight-Trontz 28), "wealthy, powerful, and dangerous" (Regis 112), "strong, dominating, confident … often isolated… [with] a tortured, tender element" (Wendell and Tan 77), "impossibly dominant" (Roach 65), "physically large and powerful, handsome or at least striking in his looks, capable of violence, rich and successful, self-confident and tending to arrogant" (Roach 132), "magnetic, powerful, and physically pleasing" (Radway 105), and "hard, angular, and dark" (Radway 128). Readers and scholars have recognised the existence of other hero types—beta heroes, virgin heroes, disabled heroes, working class heroes, gay heroes, and racially and religiously diverse heroes—but the alpha hero as defined above remains monolithic: he is almost always white, heterosexual, middle- or upper-class, wealthy, able-bodied, and older than the heroine.

Ankara Press submission guidelines offer a detailed description of the ideal Ankara hero:

> preferably … an African man…. He is attractive and successful in his own field. While standard careers and professions such as doctors, lawyers and businessmen are welcome, alternative careers such as the arts and in skilled labour (mechanics, carpenters, taxi drivers, plumbers etc.) should be explored

> and are encouraged. He should be sensitive, attentive, emotionally expressive and realistic *without conforming to the romantic hero stereotype (i.e. domineering, arrogant, and dismissive)*. … The hero should not dominate or dictate to the heroine … and *stereotyped relationship patterns and roles (eg* [sic] *the heroine as submissive and domestic, the hero as macho and ambitious with a successful career) should be challenged*. (*Submission Guidelines*, my emphasis)

The guidelines indicate the extent to which Ankara heroes are defined against "the romantic hero stereotype"—in other words, the Western alpha hero. But there is a problem with the definition of the Western alpha hero, specifically the way it has been used as a universal definition for romance masculinity. In her definition, Regis sees the masquerading Arab sheikh hero of Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) as the "ideal [or "prototypical"] alpha male" (117). What Regis does not acknowledge about this hero is his cultural identity; he is not ethnically Arab, but British-Spanish, and thus unavoidably implicated in the period's imperialism (see Dannenberg; Blake). The "ideal" alpha hero of romance is a European coloniser. Allan offers a second interpretation of the Western alpha hero, which is further revealing of the problem with the above definitions. Following Erving Goffman's description of the American male, Allan claims the "archetypal romance hero" is "young, … *white*, urban, *northern*, heterosexual…" (Goffman 128 cited in *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* 12, my emphasis). What Allan implicitly acknowledges here, is that the scholarly definition of the "archetypal romance hero" is based on Western, white, primarily American men.

A similar discourse has emerged in the study of men and masculinities, where scholars have pointed to the need for a new, or at least revised, scholarly approach that recognises the specificities of African masculinities. Mfecane critiques the reliance of research into African masculinities "on theories of gender developed in the Global North" (291) because "such theories offer narrow definitions of masculinity, which are unable to fully account for the complex life experiences of African men" (292). Dery agrees, writing that "[d]eveloping culturally nuanced understandings on the meanings of masculinities from the global South is necessary in developing global synergies by complementing the existing body of knowledge produced in the global North" (9674). Descriptions of the Western alpha hero and theorising based upon this is also not neutral. Examining how Ankara Press write heroes in response to this gives an opportunity to recontextualise and, I would argue, decolonise romance hero masculinity. Such an examination can also provide an opportunity to observe how this Nigerian series reflects on issues impacting African men. There is no single model of "African masculinity" and no single set of issues experienced by African men even if, as Ammann and Staudacher put it, "[p]ossibly on no other continent are men and masculinities depicted more homogenously than in Africa" (760). However, there are some dominant discourses around masculinity that, while perhaps not prominent in the global North, are shared by African men in many parts of the continent and which are visible, in various ways, in Ankara Press romances: fatherhood, generational differences, and gentle masculinity. I will explore each of these in more detail below.

"Boy, this guy was fine"(Awonubi, *Love's Persuasion*, chap. 2): Ankara Heroes Described

Romances novels are about "the glorification of the male body, maleness, masculinity, and male sexuality" (Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* 10). Descriptions of the Western alpha hero—"tall and dark," "big," "physically large and powerful, handsome or at least striking in his looks"—indicate the kind of male body that is glorified in romance novels. Initially, it seems as though Ankara Press heroes conform to the genre's expectations of physical appearance. Heroes are tall, broad-shouldered and well-dressed. In *This Crazy Paradise*, the first sighting of the hero is framed as inspiration for the romance novel the heroine is writing:

> A lone figure walking through the surf. Chocolate-skinned like her, but that's where the likeness ended. He was built like a panther. A muscled body, strong in all the right places – like the shoulders, back and neck – but lean and toned in all the right places too … He was wearing a white shirt and matching trousers cut off at mid-calf. Both were getting soaked and clung to his body, rendering the fabric transparent so she could see that dark form underneath. … She smiled to herself. There he is. And I'm only on the first page. (chap. 1)

Many of the tropes of the Western alpha hero—animalism, physical strength, desirability—are present in this description. Yet, this passage is quite unusual in setting up archetypes that are more often rejected. For example, the comparison of the hero to an animal (a common feature of romance novels noted by Regis and others) only occurs in three Ankara stories and then only briefly. Allan notes the repeated use of words like "powerful," "dominant," "tall," and "firm" in 1980s and 1990s Harlequin category romance novels ("The Purity of His Maleness" 33). Yet these words are not foregrounded in the descriptions of Ankara heroes: the word "powerful" is used only seven times and in only three novels, while "dominant" is not used at all to describe the hero. Ankara novels do focus on describing the hero's physical appearance, but seem careful to minimise or nuance an emphasis on masculine strength. In *Love Next Door*, the hero Kopano has "broad shoulders," "biceps… big enough to bulk but not so big as to deform his arms," "muscular thighs and [a] bulge in his pants" (chap. 1). Yet this is offset by Kopano's lack of physical threat or pushiness. He smiles at the heroine repeatedly, laughs, does not press his opinions too heavily—he says "I don't want to push you into anything" (chap. 1)—carries her dropped shopping, and helps her up when she falls. Later in the opening chapter, when the heroine hears a knock on the door she immediately thinks of "her grandparents' fears and warnings about the dangers of a young woman living by herself in 'big, bad, Johannesburg'" but when she realises it is Kopano, "[r]elief swept through her" (chap. 1). Given his physical form, Kopano could represent a threat, but here is explicitly set up as the opposite of the anticipated dangerous man.

There are some differences in the hero's temperament as well. Gone is the wild anger and forceful nature of the Western alpha. Instead, the hero of *This Crazy Paradise* "didn't look dangerous" and is described as "sentimental, and a bit of a romantic" (chap. 8). In *Love Me Unconditionally* the hero is "very nice and kind" (chap. 14) and "[k]indness … could make a woman go weak, especially if she had never known such a thing in past relationships"

(Awonubi, *Love's Persuasion*, chap. 7). The idea of the Western alpha hero is specifically reworked in *Love Next Door* as the heroine's friend remarks: "[d]id we not just witness [the hero] play alpha male…? Think about it; he came to make sure that you weren't offended when he turned you down and he used the word beautiful on you twice. Twice" (chap. 4). This description is quite a contrast to definitions of the Western alpha hero described above. Vulnerability is a key feature of Ankara heroes; the hero of *The Seeing Place* is "vulnerable and tender" (chap. 4) and the hero of *A Tailor-Made Romance* "sounded so vulnerable … [the heroine's] heart knotted" (chap. 11). Ammann and Staudacher note that in Africa, "new masculine ideals related to egalitarianism, compassion, and love are currently emerging" (762). Such ideas align with what Ankara Press's founder Bibi Bakare-Yusuf identifies as "examples of gentle masculinity" (Shercliff, "Ankara Press: Q&A with Publisher Bibi Bakare-Yusuf"). Allan argues that "vulnerable heroes are just yet another example of hybrid masculinity" and such vulnerability does not change the core structure of the narrative: "the hero of the romance novel is still and always will be endowed with 'spectacular masculinity'" (i.e. Western alpha masculinity) (Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* 113).

Yet, I would argue that Ankara romances are doing something different with their hero's vulnerability, using it not to reinforce his "spectacular" masculinity, but to further redefine the Ankara hero away from the Western alpha and from local patriarchal custom. This can be seen in the emotional expressiveness of Ankara heroes, who often cry. In *Love Me Unconditionally*, the hero "put his hands in his head [sic] and wept like a baby, glad that all his employees had gone home and would not see their Oga like this" (chap. 5). In *The Seeing Place,* the hero "put his head in his hands and sobbed into them" while his grandmother encourages him "[c]ry, my boy. Cry all you want" (chap. 8). The heroines describing the heroes as boyish is not uncommon; in *A Tailor-Made Romance*, "[h]is smile was humble, the kind that could make an adult look like a child" (chap. 1) and in *Love's Persuasion* "[h]e looked at her like a little boy who was expecting a telling off" (chap. 13). Describing heroes as boys or children breaks the connection of these African men with persistent stereotypes of problematic behaviour (i.e. violence, aggression, anger) often drawn from older generations. Parents play an important role in men's development: Mfecane notes "[w]hen black African men experience personal life problems, … [t]ypically, they start by consulting family elders and spiritual healers to get some perspectives" (299). In a study of masculinity in rural northern Ghana, Dery found that "[m]any participants recounted being encouraged by their parents to aspire to hegemonic masculine ideals, such as developing the ability to contain pain and emotional vulnerability" (9677). Reimagining heroes as boys makes them less threatening to the heroines, but also points to the potential for children to re-learn alternative masculine behaviours and to define their masculinity outside their elders' influence. Several Ankara heroes come to terms with problematic relationships with their parents, particularly the perception that their fathers have been poor role models for how to treat women. The hero of *This Crazy Paradise* rejects the workaholic model his father presented, and other heroes similarly define their masculinity in contrast to the example set by their fathers. In *Love's Persuasion*, the hero remarks, "[m]y father has a lot of old-fashioned ideas about women, ones I don't agree with" (chap. 5). In *Love Next Door*, the hero Kopano tells the heroine "[m]y dad being a bad husband and father actually taught me what it takes to be a husband and father" (chap. 6). In an examination of Nigerian women's fiction, Erwin notes that father figures are emphasised and suggests this is a response to societal change and an attempt to "de-link the Western conflation of husband

and patriarch" (Erwin 92). The vulnerability of Ankara heroes similarly undercuts and redefines Western alpha masculinity while at the same time critiquing patriarchal ideas drawn from older generations.

"Just the lawyers, doctors and bankers" (Awonubi, *Love Me Unconditionally*, chap. 5): Career, Wealth and Status

Western romance novels inextricably connect capitalism, hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy (Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* 29). Kamblé notes that "[t]he preoccupation with men who own land, labor, and capital goods across national boundaries has become increasingly visible in most popular romance novels" (32). Romance novel capitalism, and the heroes who represent it, is overwhelmingly defined in alignment with white, Western values: Young, discussing American romances with Asian heroines, remarks on the "therapeutic power of white economic hegemony" (221) for these protagonists. Such values have travelled with Western romance, leading some to argue that "overseas interest in Harlequin books has less to do with the specificities of American/British culture than it has to do with the fantasy of capitalist success and 'American style capitalism'" (Darbyshire 8, cited in Daud 532). Interestingly, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf addresses the entrenched nature of romance masculinity and wealth, saying, "[i]t was difficult to edit [heroes's] wealth out because they were so woven into the structure of the … Mills and Boon … story" (Shercliff, 'Ankara Press: Q&A with Publisher Bibi Bakare-Yusuf'). The association of capitalism and masculinity is evident in African romance: Muhomah's study of Kenyan romance describes the hero as "the picture of success: a good job and all the trappings of wealth, including a car and a big well-furnished house" (78; see also Erwin). This is reminiscent of the term "Big Man" which exemplifies hegemonic masculinity in many parts of Africa—Hollander notes such "Big Men" "are no longer muscular hunters or fierce warriors, but rather hold prestigious offices, drive large cars, and live in large houses" (421). Deborah Nyangulu observes that "[s]ynonyms such as manager, strong man, autocratic personal ruler, patron, entrepreneur, man of renown, [and] generous rich man … have all been suggested as alternatives to Big Man" ("Big Men and Performances of Sovereignty" 103)—many of these labels also apply to Ankara heroes.[4] The model of a wealthy alpha hero is connected to both the Western romance novel and African culture in these Ankara Press titles. Yet, romance novels do not simply reify capitalism: there is an unease about capitalism which is figured through the relationship of the hero and heroine—for example, "reservations about the capitalist's ethics" (Kamblé 36). Ankara Press books are, I argue, engaged in a rejection of such fantasies of capitalism.

The most obvious way in which Ankara Press romances critique the links between capitalism and masculinity is through the hero's profession. Wendell and Tan argue that "[t]he hero's occupation often forms a short-hand to his character" (91). Most Ankara heroes are business owners, managing directors, and millionaires, and all but two heroes end the novel with career and financial success. However, the ten novels also feature heroes with the "alternative careers" encouraged by the submission guidelines, including a tailor, actor, artist, and photographer. Moreover, the books acknowledge the gendered expectations for heroes to hold particular jobs, challenging the exclusion of feminised professions for

romance heroes—Wendell and Tan note that roles like "kindergarten teacher" are "questionable … unless they involve athleticism or also carry considerable cultural cachet" (92). In *Love Next Door*, the heroine is surprised that Kopano, the hero, is a primary school teacher:

> "I'm a teacher" …
> "A teacher?" Abby repeated in surprise. Her voice was tainted with disbelief.
> "Is there something wrong with that?"
> "No!" Abby answered quickly but was still surprised. "High school or primary?"
> … "Primary. Grades three to seven."
> "Really?" (chap. 3)

The repetition of surprise alongside disbelief draws attention to the unexpectedness of this job for the hero, particularly that he teaches younger children. He acknowledges that people are usually "amazed" (chap. 3) when they find out his job and classes himself as a "myth-buster" (chap. 5). Later in the chapter she asks again, "are you really a teacher?" to which he replies, "[y]es, don't you believe me?" (chap. 3). The perceived feminisation of the job is made clear when the heroine compares his work to nursing. The hero laughs, asking, "[d]id you just compare me to a nurse?" and she replies "[t]here's nothing wrong with nursing and there are male nurses too" (chap. 3). Later in the novel, when the heroine is discussing Kopano with a friend, she is advised that his career has the potential to limit their future happiness due to the disparity in their future earnings (chap. 9). A similar tension arises in *The Seeing Place*, where the hero imagines the professional and income disparity between himself and the older heroine would impact on their romance: "[w]omen like that, self-made power dressers with an income of 100k per month, laughed at men like him" (chap. 3). The possible impact of alternative careers on the romantic relationship and its potential to lower the desirability of the hero is acknowledged. Ultimately, *Love Next Door* backs down from fully endorsing its myth-busting hero. He teaches art and physical education at "one of the city's exclusive private schools" (chap. 3), thereby falling into the exception to feminised jobs outlined by Wendell and Tan (jobs that "involve athleticism or which have cultural cachet"). By the end of the novel, he has apparently abandoned teaching and is now hailed as "'the new best thing in art' and 'the future of art'" (chap. 12), with a show attracting "a Who's Who of New York City" (chap. 11). Even as a resistance is evident, this novel is still buying into generic expectations of masculine wealth.

A Tailor-Made Romance also challenges assumptions about the hero's career and the extent to which it defines his desirability. On their first date, the hero Adnan tells the heroine Tishe, "'I'm a tailor,'" at which "[s]he nearly choked on her water. 'What?' 'You sound surprised.' 'I am.' *And disappointed too*" (chap. 2). Exchanging messages with her friend Alero immediately after the date, it is clear that it is the hero's job that prevents her from wanting to take the relationship further.

> *Miss Tish: Bad news. Won't be seeing him any more. *sad face* It's what he does. His job.*
> *Alero Peperempe: What about it?*
> *Miss Tish: He's a tailor.* She sighed as she press[ed] send.

> *Alero Peperempe: What? How did he allow himself to become that?*
> *Miss Tish: *I don't know**
> *Alero Peperempe: What a waste. What a complete misuse of body and looks and build and … I can't believe it. What does he sew?* Alero's messages came in all at once
> *Miss Tish: What does it matter? His 'shop' is in Mushin. MUSHIN!* She hoped the caps would give Alero a hint of how irritated she was.
> *Alero Peperempe: That bad?* (chap. 2)

Although intensely attracted to Adnan, the heroine's belief that he is simply "a tailor from Mushin" (a less affluent suburb of Lagos) forms a significant barrier to their relationship. Partway through the novel she reflects on their relationship:

> even though Adnan was a great lover, she wasn't totally content. … money and social status were really crucial factors to consider. How would he introduce himself to her colleagues? Especially now that people attached their company name to their last name. Bolatito, Insight. Helen, Zenith. Chioma, MTN. Then they'll hear Adnan, T-a-i-l-o-r … nah. Much as she liked Adnan, she deserved more. (chap. 6)

The heroine is expressing views that the novels indicate are commonly held in Nigerian culture. Adnan himself considers: "She must be one of those women who only believed in men that held white-collar jobs. A man without a suit, a car—didn't matter if it was an official car or not—a stressful day and a good salary didn't measure up" (chap. 3). In *Love Me Unconditionally* the heroine Deola revealingly discusses relationships with her parents. Her father scolds her mother, pronouncing, "[t]he problem with you Nigerians is that you are in love with titles. Doctor this, barrister or chief that" (chap. 4). Deola agrees, stating, "[a] lawyer is just a title like any other. It really is no big deal," to which her mother responds, "[w]ell it is a big deal here in Nigeria" (chap. 4). Deola concludes that "[s]ometimes the narrow-mindedness of Nigerian society was suffocating" (chap. 4). Heroes with less conventional careers endure similar pressure. The hero's father in *Love's Persuasion* is highly critical of his son's desire to be a writer, admonishing, "all you want to do is … this writing thing you say is so important to you. I've let you do your own thing, but now it's time for you to take over the reins and shoulder your responsibility" (chap. 4). In *The Seeing Place*, the grandmother of the actor hero comments, "'Pfff. That's not a man's work'" to which "[h]e wasn't sure whether she meant the theatre or making tea" (chap. 3). She thus diminishes both his non-standard career and his domestic abilities.

Yet *A Tailor-Made Romance* resists such views (although it still rewards the heroine with the revelation that Adnan is no mere "tailor from Mushin" but runs a fashion institute and holds a chemistry degree). When an alternative, more acceptable (in the heroine's eyes) suitor appears—he is wealthy and educated—he is neglectful of their romance: "Leke had asked her out on two dates and cancelled a few hours before on both occasions. He seemed too busy to offer Tishe the attention she craved" (chap. 4). Tishe ultimately realises that although he "matched her every criterion on paper, [he] just did not fit" (chap. 11). A similarly "on paper" suitable suitor is rejected in *Love Me Unconditionally*—although "handsome … a lawyer and a real gentleman" (chap. 1), her "perfect answer" (chap. 1) refuses

to commit until she falls pregnant, and cheats on her when she discovers she is infertile. The actual hero of this novel is explicitly positioned as not a lawyer, doctor or banker (chap. 5). In many Ankara Press titles, the "lawyers, doctors and bankers" (Awonubi, *Love Me Unconditionally*, chap. 5) are not in fact adequate romance heroes. *A Tailor-Made Romance* also challenges the idea that such views and pressures come only from heroines's parents. When Tishe's mother meets Adnan, she asks,

> "Where does he work?"
> Tishe rolled her eyes. "Who? Adnan? He's a tailor."
> Her mum turned to her. "Do you have a problem with that?"
> "How can you even ask, mum? Of course I do. A tailor?"
> Her mother dropped the TV remote control. "Tishe! I can't believe I raised you to be this shallow. There is dignity in labour! Don't you know this?" (chap. 8)

Her mother reveals that Tishe's own father was "a butcher in Brixton" when they met and he still "took such great care of me" (chap. 8)—emphasising the real value of Ankara Press heroes: their caring.

"Let him take care of you" (Awonubi, *Love's Persuasion*, chap. 6): Providership and Caring

Care is key to the articulation of Ankara heroes but is not foregrounded in descriptions of the Western alpha hero. In fact, this articulation is closer to the rarer beta hero type: "the best friend, the kindlier, mellower guy" (Wendell and Tan 79). Caring and providing are key features of successful masculinity in many African countries as "[h]egemonic depictions of African men have focused primarily on providership—the ability of men to financially cater for their families" (McLean 786). Indeed, "caring and providing for one's family members is paramount for many men in Africa; it often constitutes a major aspect of masculinities" (Ammann and Staudacher 764). Yet this is increasingly difficult to achieve: Ammann and Staudacher have theorised a "crisis of masculinity" whereby African men are "unable to achieve their ideals of masculinity, such as providing for one's family, marrying, fathering, and building a house" (760; see also Cornwall, Boonzaier and van Niekerk) and "react to circumstances of poverty and disempowerment via violent or hypersexualized masculinities" (McLean 800). This may be linked to neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, which increased women's participation in the workforce (Perry, cited in Ammann and Staudacher 760). Yet McLean's study of young fathers in Sierra Leone found that "when they inevitably fall short of expectations, rather than succumbing to violence or shirking responsibility—as the 'crisis of masculinity' narrative would suggest—many exhibit alternative masculinities tied to love and care" (McLean 800). Such ideals are evident in Ankara heroes. Ankara novels acknowledge this crisis of masculinity but seek a different solution that does not critique or seek to limit women's participation in work but which echoes features of the beta hero (in particular domestic caring and a focus on family) and redefines successful masculinity accordingly. While Ankara heroes might not always

conform to typical wealthy archetypes, they are committed to a neoliberal ideology of individual labour and the value in work (a reimaginging, perhaps, of what Allan calls the valorisation of "successful labouring" ("The Purity of His Maleness" 33). What Ankara Press titles do, I argue, is situate this work and its value in caring for others.

Care is connected to successful masculinity for Ankara heroes: the hero of *The Seeing Place* wonders "*[w]hat kind of man am I if I can't take care of the people who need me most?*" (chap. 3). Adnan has "been taking care of [his] mum and [sister] since [their] dad died" (*A Tailor-Made Romance*, chap. 10) and in *Love Next Door* the hero Kopano "is very caring and likes looking after people, especially the women in his life" (chap. 7). Heroes take care of family and friends, but also bills, sick flatmates (*Finding Love Again*), and the heroines themselves. The hero's role as provider is connected to his success in capitalist enterprise—Adnan, for example, remarks that he started his tailoring business because "I had to pay the mortgage" (*A Tailor-Made Romance*, chap. 11). Yet there is a balance to be struck. The reason heroes work and engage in capitalist enterprise is to provide and care for others; working for the sake of wealth is critiqued, in the same way that the material trappings of wealth are rejected in many texts. In *Finding Love Again* the hero remarks, "I am rich, but my millions can't buy time" (chap. 15) and Adnan muses, "[y]ou know, we've become so obsessed with money that we've lost touch with what is really valuable in life … Happiness, contentment" (*A Tailor-Made Romance*, chap. 6). In *This Crazy Paradise*, the hero's father "buried himself in work" and "died of a heart attack at his desk" (chap. 4). He reflects that while "[h]is dad made sure he had plenty of toys … all the money in the world couldn't buy his father's time" (chap. 6). The hero realises he had "become precisely what I didn't want to be: my father" (chap. 7) and relinquishes the business to his partner, deciding to use his "monthly stipend" to "lead a simple life" sailing around the world with the heroine and having "a baby. Or two or three" (chap. 10). While the hero is clearly still wealthy, he is choosing to provide and care for his future family over capitalist enterprise (emphasised by his decision to reverse his vasectomy). The role of man as provider is thus linked to economics but is also about smaller acts of care—and wealth can jeopardise the hero's ability to be an adequate carer.

While Ankara heroes are given opportunities to rescue the heroine—from physical attack, burglary, drowning—rescue also takes smaller, less showy forms. Wendell and Tan remark that "[r]omance novel heroes often show how much they care in big, showy gestures, like saving the heroine from certain death; small domestic gestures that come across as womanish, such as cleaning the house after she's had a difficult day, will rarely show themselves" (74). But this is not true of Ankara Press romances. Ankara texts are filled with examples of smaller, domestic acts of care. Almost all Ankara heroes are unusually good cooks and prepare food for the heroine. They bring the heroine cake and share it with her (*Love Next Door*), wash up (*Love Next Door*, *The Seeing Place*), iron the heroine's clothes, wear aprons and make breakfast in bed (*Finding Love Again*). The hero's labour is often specifically designed to relieve the heroine: in *A Tailor-Made Romance* as Tishe "got up and began to pack away the uneaten food and clear the dishes" Adnan says "'Please don't worry, I've got it.'" and "took the plates out of her hands" (chap. 5). In *Love Next Door* and *Finding Love Again* the heroes care for the heroines when they have had too much to drink. In *A Taste of Love*, the hero sorts out the heroine's pizza order and is later referred to as "a handsome stranger who swoops in to save the day" (chap. 2), indicating how "small domestic gestures" can be framed as heroic. These gestures are also desirable: in *This Crazy Paradise* the heroine "heard [the hero] open a cupboard inside, run the water, close the fridge. He lit the gas and clunked

the coffee pot down on the ring. Small domestic sounds that filled her with nameless longing" (chap. 8).

Such domestic acts are often a surprise to the heroines, indicating once again how Ankara heroes are breaking stereotypes. In *Black Sparkle Romance* the heroine teases the hero, by saying, "I doubt you can cook anything but water and noodles" to which he responds "[y]ou'd be surprised," proceeding to make her "a meal of spaghetti, tomato sauce and fried fish" at which she "nodded her amazement" (chap. 10). In *Love's Persuasion*, the hero Tony "took out fresh vegetables and a bag of prawns from the freezer" and her first response is "*Don't tell me this guy is expecting me to cook his dinner?*" (chap. 10). Yet, "to her delight, he brought out a chopping board and started peeling and slicing the vegetables" (chap. 10). She thinks, "[a] man who loved books, had a great sense of humour, and was handsome, kind and loaded, and who could cook as well. He must be too good to be true" (chap. 10). The surprise often comes from the contrast between Ankara heroes and other, unsuitable men, for example the heroine's ex-fianceé in *Finding Love Again*, who she states "*could never make breakfast; only trouble*" (chap. 10). *Love Me Unconditionally* opens with the heroine's ex-boyfriend demanding, "[w]here is my food?" while "[h]er head hurt … [h]er eyes were red from staring at the computer all day and all she had wanted was to have a long hot bath and curl up in bed" (chap. 1). The hero of this text, on the other hand, is "a very good cook" (chap. 17).

The surprise of some heroines is also indicative of persistent gender norms around providership. There are widespread views that heroines should "marry someone and let him take care of you" (*Love's Persuasion*, chap. 6). In *The Seeing Place*, the heroine's neighbour pronounces, "[s]omeone like you needs a man who can take care of you, protect you," prompting her to muse, "I've been taking care of myself for so long" (chap. 9). Yet, such views are then countered. In *Love's Persuasion*, the heroine "had to restrain herself from slapping" the person who suggested she "marry the first suitor that came along" (chap. 6). In *Finding Love Again*, when the heroine's friend exhorts the hero to "[t]ake care of my friend" he replies, "I will do my best to care for Miss I-prefer-to-do-things-myself. I love her the way she is, though" (chap. 16). In *The Seeing Place*, the hero has a strong sense of responsibility for his sister and grandmother—he visits once a week, calls home every evening, and "had been supporting his grandmother and his sister for so many years now" (chap. 2). After the heroine pays 40,000 rand for his sister to attend rehab, he is furious, telling the heroine, "[i]t's my job to take care of my little sister, not yours! … "I can't have you humiliate me in this way" (chap. 7). He acknowledges, later, that "[i]t was hard for me that you helped me" because of his "pride" (chap. 10). It seems that the gender roles of providing are flipped in this text, with the heroine described as "being a hero" (chap. 8) rather than him. Interestingly, the author's initial submission featured a wealthy hero and less-wealthy heroine, but the editorial team gender-flipped the novel to counter "the stereotype" (Shercliff, "Ankara Press Is Going against Romance Stereotypes"). It thus tracks that this text would counter stereotypes and norms in other ways too.

"I'm on your side" (Awonubi, *Love Me Unconditionally*, chap. 11): Displacing Toxic Masculinity

While Ankara romances construct their heroes in opposition to the Western alpha hero, certain traits associated with the archetype—dominance, sexual aggression, anger—are still visible in the books. However, these traits are not seen in the hero, but are displaced onto other men—collectively and individually—and to local culture and customs, being labelled as toxic in the process. Toxic men have consistent traits: they cheat ("[b]y the time she left him, he had slept with almost every mutual female friend they had on Facebook" (*A Tailor-Made Romance*, chap. 1)), abandon weddings (in *The Elevator Kiss* the heroine's ex-fiancé left her at the altar, stole all their money, and "left her for some young Jo'burg fly girl" (chap. 1)) and shirk their responsibilities (the ex-boyfriend in *A Taste of Love* abandoned the heroine when she became pregnant with their child). Many traits perceived as toxic are connected with South African and Nigerian culture. Talking with her work colleagues in *Love Me Unconditionally*, the heroine

> wonder[ed] why marriage seemed to be so arduous this side of the equator. Everyone said it was give and take, but from what she heard the women seemed to be doing most of the giving and the men doing all the taking. To Deola, that was modern day slavery, not an equal partnership. (chap. 8)

A particularly toxic trait that is raised in several novels is sexual aggression, a core aspect of the Western alpha hero. There is a widespread view that men, in general, will pressure women for sex, force themselves upon women, and shun contraception. In *Finding Love Again*, the heroine wonders about the hero: *"[d]oes he want to make a sexual proposition? Men always did that*" (chap. 3). The heroine declares, "[y]ou men are predators, hunters" (chap. 10)—using precisely the terms often used to describe Western alpha heroes. Such toxic behaviour is sometimes also observed in individual men: in *This Crazy Paradise* the heroine's ex-boyfriend called her "uptight" and "prudish" because she wouldn't sleep with him (chap. 2). In *The Seeing Place,* "Joseph 'Killer' Moloi" attempts to assault the heroine outside a nightclub and had previously been "arrested for robbery and attempted rape" (chap. 6). These texts thus seem to uphold "[t]he stereotypical and simplistic image of 'the African man' … linked to violence, domination, the abuse of power, irresponsibility, drugs, virility, and promiscuity" (Ammann and Staudacher 760).

Ankara romances counter this toxic masculinity in two ways. The first is a technique of displacing toxic behaviour to show how the hero himself is *not* toxic and foregrounding his uniqueness—the sense that he is "not like other men." Thus, heroes are compared favourably with other individual men, specifically ex-boyfriends and fiancés. In *Black Sparkle Romance*, the hero "remembered" to use a condom, whereas "[t]he others had never remembered—[the heroine] had been the one who reminded them" (chap. 11). The heroine of this text has previously been "dumped," "insulted" and "treated … like dirt" by "jerks" and "chauvinistic bad boys," but sees the hero as "the opposite" (chap. 7). In *Finding Love Again*, the hero's difference is praised: "How many men could control their urges and respect a woman half as much? Not many" (chap. 11). Heroes are positioned alongside heroines as critical or dismissive of patriarchal aspects of culture, which are shown to damage the hero as much as the heroine (for example, tension around the hero's career choice). In *Love's Persuasion*, the hero Tony remarks that "[s]ome of our customs are wonderful and others … There are times when I find it all a bit too much" (chap. 5). The heroine of *A Taste of Love* is a single mother, and the hero acknowledges that "[t]he fact she was a single mother wasn't

exactly in her favour, at least not in the semi-conservative Nigerian setup … [b]ut he had never cared much about convention" (chap. 4). In *Love Me Unconditionally*, the hero promises, "I'm on your side as an ardent supporter of women's rights" (chap. 11) yet acknowledges how difficult such views can be:

> He had always seen himself as a new, reconstructed Naija guy. The kind of man who was always ranting about how chauvinistic and male-orientated aspects of Nigerian culture could be, who stood up for the rights of women, and liked to be thought of as a progressive kind of chap. It worried him that occasionally he struggled with the kind of thoughts that made him feel no different to the kind of guy he used to despise. Culture was strong, and sometimes swimming against the tide was not only wearying but could make you unpopular. (chap. 16)

Ankara heroes also differ from heroes in other African romance and chick lit texts who do demonstrate "violent and toxic masculinities that assert power, exert control, and demand submissiveness" (Spencer, '"Having It All"?' 92). Yet, while constructing heroes in this way might detox them as individuals, it does not ultimately counter the essentialising of African men as violent and dominant, nor does it seek to understand more deeply the patriarchal customs and structures of African society and culture.

The second way Ankara romances counter toxic masculinity is by contextualising it within complex gender and power relations in postcolonial Africa. In *The Seeing Place*, after narrowly avoiding an attack from Joseph 'Killer' Moloi, the heroine connects his behaviour to his upbringing in "a slum," noting that "[e]ither you make fantastically good, or you go under. These are not bad people […] They're wounded. It's a vicious cycle" (chap. 6). The novel is here acknowledging the violence seen as intrinsic to cultural masculinity in South Africa (Connell, "Globalization, Imperialism, and Masculinities" 10), recontextualising Moloi as more than a simple villain. This text is aligned with recent scholarship on African men and masculinities that has indicated a move away from masculine identities defined by violence and dominance (Dery; Ammann and Staudacher). It also connects behaviour to poverty; Ouzgane and Morrell have pointed out that "[w]hile some African men … have been able to enter the global economy on something like equal terms (particularly among well-educated and well-located men in the wealthy south …), most men have felt the weight of globalization as poverty" (7). *The Seeing Place* thus follows scholarship in acknowledging the role of wider pressures (globalisation, the legacy of colonial rule, economics) in constructing toxic masculinities.

Conclusion

Ankara Press arose from a desire to have more stories being told "for the African and diaspora Market" (*Submission Guidelines*)—the Africanization of these novels is clearly part of their appeal: a reader commenting on a review of *The Seeing Place* writes that it is

"unapologetically African" (Bio125). Yet romance novels written and read in different parts of the world are linked through the global genre terms that connect them—Ankara romances are connected to Western romance through their reference to, and recognition of, the Western alpha hero. African romance novels are often seen as influenced by Western genre forms (especially Harlequin Mills & Boon) with degrees of Africanization "achieved through a series of variations that occur not at the structural, but at the paradigmatic level" (Moudileno 123). Thus, while romance settings, characters and values might be Africanized, there seems to be an agreement that the core structures of the genre are drawn from the Western literary tradition. For Ankara romances, the structures of the Western romance, as outlined by Regis, are still present. However, their heroes—a key ingredient of the Western popular romance—are not so consistent.

While retaining the physical attractiveness of Western alpha heroes—broad shoulders, visible muscles—Ankara heroes' hard bodies are softened by being placed alongside qualities such as kindness and vulnerability. Some Ankara heroes undertake careers as primary school teachers, artists, and tailors, and reject patriarchal expectations for them to follow more typically masculine career paths. Ostentatious displays of wealth are largely rejected, although the hero is still wealthy in all Ankara titles—this proves a persistent facet of romance masculinity. But Ankara heroes revalue neoliberal capitalist enterprise by undertaking it primarily in order to provide, through both financial support for their families, and through everyday domestic acts of care. Finally, negative or toxic qualities of the Western alpha hero—anger, sexual aggression and dominance—are still present in Ankara romances, but they are shifted to other men—individuals, in the shape of ex-boyfriends and unwanted suitors, and collectives, through the perceived patriarchy of Nigerian and South African culture.

Ankara heroes clearly differ from the Western alpha archetype. The importation or reproduction of Western romance archetypes is not neutral—Daud notes that "the fear of imported culture and subsequently an American/Western cultural imperialism and loss of local culture, which has already been damaged by the colonial legacy, is alluded to in several studies of popular romance in … postcolonial contexts" including Nigerian *soyyaya* fiction (539). By understanding the alpha hero archetype as a Western, colonial model, we can see why Ankara Press rejects and reworks the figure. If these texts are indeed offering a "New Kind of Romance" ("About Us") that is distinctively African, then Africanizing the romance hero is a necessary part of that process. By indicating how the Western alpha does not fit into these African texts, Ankara romances invite us to consider how narrowly the romance alpha archetype is defined. Ankara romances are in essence participating in a decolonising of the romance genre. Ratele has called for a "decolonial attitude" in African masculinity studies, meaning, 1) "countering coloniality by seeking to subvert and interrupt the globally controlling logics of colonial/modern racist difference," 2) "reckoning with the persisting effects of colonialism in the global and local gender orders and relations," and 3) "striv[ing] to bring to light the problems of working on masculinity in the wake of colonialism" ("An Invitation to Decoloniality" 770). Adapting Ratele's words, I would argue that in reworking their heroes as they have, Ankara romances demonstrate a decolonial attitude to the romance genre. First, they "counter coloniality by seeking to subvert and interrupt the globally controlling logics of [the (Western) romance alpha hero]"—in other words, they demonstrate that the alpha hero is not neutral, but a construction rooted in Western colonialism. Second, they "reckon… with the persisting effects of colonialism in [global and

local constructions of romance masculinity]," showing that the Western alpha model has "colonised" African romance literature, but also how to resist that model. Third, they "strive to bring to light the problems of [writing] masculinity in the wake of [the dominance of Western romance]" by showing how persistent some traits of the Western alpha hero can be and, as I've indicated above, how scholars, editors, authors and readers have uncritically accepted the universality of the Western alpha hero.

A secondary implication of Ankara Press's Africanization of their romance heroes is that these novels offer a space to explore African masculinity and the attendant crisis of masculinity in Africa. Scholars of men and masculinities in Africa have indicated some of the parameters of this crisis, where "the ideology of man as provider … situates men within a set of aspirations and expectations that are becoming ever more difficult for them to fulfil in the contemporary economy" (Cornwall 16). The inability to fulfil the role of provider, for whatever reason, can lead to male violence: "[s]tudies undertaken in South Africa, Congo and Kenya, for example, have noted the extent to which a lack of financial resources and the inability to survive financially is linked to men's perpetration of interpersonal violence" (Boonzaier and van Niekerk 461). The use of African romance texts to explore and challenge patriarchal practices is not uncommon (see Erwin; Gehrmann; Haruna and Abd Aziz; Kiyawa; Muhomah; Nibafasha). Ankara Press romances are clearly offering challenges to particular behaviours associated with African men—oppressive fathers, violent assailants, and unfaithful ex-partners. Yet, I would argue that the way Ankara Press titles displace toxic masculinity away from the hero offers a further challenge to social practice. Amman and Staudacher argue that while "[o]n the one hand, many men in Africa face difficulties in postcolonial, neoliberal, and often precarious contexts … [o]n the other hand, such troubles also lead to *creative disruptions* in which new possibilities emerge" (764, my emphasis). This is reminiscent of Moudileno's assertion that "the creativity involved in the production of indigenous narratives … deliberately challenge[s] the idea that local, West African romance writers and readers are mainly passive consumers of foreign genres or products" (128). By offering a new kind of hero, constructed as oppositional to toxic behaviours associated with a crisis of African masculinities, I argue that Ankara Press romances are engaged in precisely this kind of creative disruption. In doing so, they provide a new perspective on masculinity in Nigeria and South Africa, while at the same time challenging dominant Western paradigms of alpha romance masculinity.

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[1] I use the term "Western" to refer to literary and cultural products and "global North" to refer to geographical spaces to recognise that there is no "place" called "the West."

[2] While the present article is not able to address this question, it would be interesting to compare Ankara's heroes with other examples of "local" or "non-Western" masculinity in Nigerian and South African popular culture (for example, romantic comedies), in which African heroes are similarly drawn between Western alpha masculinity and local models of hegemonic masculinity. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this paper for this insight.

[3] The *Valentine's Day Anthology*, which features 7 short stories (1-3 pages), is excluded from the present study. The anthology differs significantly in both tone and content. Stories are often darker, influenced by other literary genres like crime fiction, and two do not have optimistic endings. One story focuses on a queer encounter between two men—a notable departure from the strict heteronormativity of the longer novels.

[4] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this piece for suggesting this reference. See also Nyangulu, *Big Man Aesthetics* (2019).

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